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## ART. XI.—CRITICAL NOTICE.

*Memoirs of the Life of WILLIAM WIRT, Attorney General of the United States.* By JOHN P. KENNEDY. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard. 1849. 2 vols. 8vo.

THE late John Foster, in the course of his large experience as a reviewer, had frequent occasion to express an earnest wish "that the present epidemical disease in literature, the custom of making very large books about individuals, may in due time find, like other diseases, some limit to its prevalence, and at length decline and disappear. What is to become of readers, if the exit of every man of some literary eminence is thus to be followed by a long array of publications, beginning with duodecimos, extending into octavos, and expanded at last into a battalion of magnificent quartos! This swelling fungous kind of biography confounds all the right proportions in which the claims and the importance of individuals should be arranged and exhibited to the attention of the public." Had Foster lived and written in America, he would certainly have uttered this complaint in still louder and more indignant tones. Our bookshelves already bend and creak under the ponderous mass of "Lives" and "Memoirs," with which they are oppressed; and we begin to calculate with dismay how many tons will they have to bear in those glorious days, when, as the statisticians love to tell us, our population shall amount to a hundred millions, and our great men shall lie around us as thick as the leaves in Vallombrosa? The state of biographical literature in this country reminds one of the cemetery of Pére La Chaise; the visitor to that marble city of the illustrious dead is provoked to find the most conspicuous and stately monuments in it erected to the memory of persons whom he never heard of, while he can with difficulty find the modest stone which is placed over all that was mortal of some world-renowned author, hero, or statesman. The length of the elegiac inscription, also, is most frequently in an inverse proportion to the fame of the deceased.

Mr. Kennedy's Life of Wirt is ably written, and portions of it are very interesting; but it is much too long. He has almost crushed the reputation of his hero by the formidable dimensions of what was intended to magnify and perpetuate it. He has published to all the world many letters which Mr. Wirt himself would have shrunk from writing to any but his most intimate friends. Not that there are any indiscreet disclosures in them; they contain nothing of which the writer would be ashamed. But

he certainly would not have deemed the larger portion of them important enough to be placed before the public. They are the careless effusions of a few leisure minutes of the day, when he sought relief from the irksome perusal or inditing of legal documents by scribbling nonsense to an old associate. The following is a fair specimen, though a short one, of the epistolary trifling of which Mr. Wirt was very fond, and by the aid of which his biography has been swelled to the compass of two large octavo volumes.

“ My ink was rather too thick to write with pleasure, so I have thinned it, and mended my pen ; — and now, sir, here’s at you.

“ Why yes, sir, as you say, it is a pleasant thing to lead the life of a county court lawyer ; but yet (as one of Congreve’s wittol squires said, when his guardian bully suffered himself to be kicked, and called it pleasant) ‘ it is a pleasure I would as soon be without.’ Yet I doubt not that your sum of happiness is as great, if not greater, than if you were a ‘ general court lawyer,’ as the phrase used to be.

“ Those same *returns* that you speak of. — My God ! Does not a man, at such times, live as much in a minute as, in ordinary times, he does in an hour or a day ? These are the breezes of which poets and orators sing and say, that they shake the atmosphere of life, and keep it from stagnation and pestilence. I know that *your* life would be in no danger of stagnation or pestilence, even if you were to live forever at home : yet, I imagine that there is no man, however happy in the circle of his family, who does not find himself made more conscious of that happiness, and his feelings of enjoyment quickened by these occasional separations. This is the way in which I reconcile myself to them ; since, although not a county court lawyer, *at this present*, I am doomed to these separations as well as you.

“ As to the labor and fatigue which you undergo, — look at the health which you derive from it, and the consequent clearness of brain, and capacity for happiness. Besides, mark the majestic *obesity* which you exhibit, in spite of all your exercise, and consider ‘ what a thing you would be if you were bloated,’ as Falstaff says, — by inactivity.”

We object further to the very *lengthy* quotations from Mr. Wirt’s speeches on the trial of Aaron Burr, one remarkable passage in which is familiar to every school-boy in the land, and to copious extracts from a political pamphlet, that was written for a temporary purpose, and has very properly been forgotten.

And now, having discharged our conscience as reviewers by reprehending in very plain terms a most pernicious practice in biography, we are free to express our obligations to Mr. Kennedy for what is, on the whole, an excellent memoir of his friend, alike candid, faithful, and elegant. The materials appear to have been collected with great care, from a variety of sources, and they throw ample light upon the whole history and character of the person to whom they relate. Mr. Wirt’s abilities as an advocate, a lawyer, and an author, are set forth with fulness and discrimi-

nation, while his very amiable and attractive character in private life is portrayed in pleasing colors. The difficulties of the subject are confessed, and they are quite skilfully obviated.

"A life confined to the pursuits indicated in this sketch, may not be expected to charm the reader by the significance of its events. It is much more a life of reflection than of action; more a life of character than of incident. I have to present to the world a man greatly beloved for his social virtues, the illustrations of which are daily fading away with the fading memories of contemporary friends, now reduced to a few survivors: a man of letters and strong literary ambition, but who had not the leisure to gratify a taste in the indulgence of which he might have attained to high renown: a public functionary, who had no relish for politics, and who was, consequently, but little identified with that public history which so often imparts the only value to biography: a lawyer who, with a full measure of contemporary fame, has left but little on record by which the justice of that fame might be estimated."

William Wirt was born in Bladensburg, Maryland, November 8th, 1772. When he was but two years old, his father died, leaving but a very small property to the widowed mother for the support and education of a family of six children. William was a handsome and spirited boy, whose engaging manners, quick wit, and frolicsome disposition, gained for him many friends, by whose aid he pursued his studies without suffering much inconvenience from the smallness of his patrimony. Yet his education was a desultory one, obtained by snatches, as it were, from several classical schools, and lacking the finish and precision which can be acquired only at college. Ninian Edwards, afterwards Governor of Illinois, was a schoolfellow of Wirt, whom he introduced to his father, Benjamin Edwards, Esq., a gentleman of fortune and influence in Maryland. He invited young Wirt to become a member of his family, as a teacher for the boys, with the use of an excellent private library for the prosecution of his own studies. The offer was accepted, and the twenty months passed in Mr. Edwards's house formed the most agreeable and useful portion of Wirt's youthful career. Here he had books, judicious advice and example, and pleasant domestic influences, to aid in the formation of his character at what is the most critical period of a young man's life. Leaving this happy home for the purpose of beginning his professional studies, he spent a year or two in an attorney's office, and then began the practice of law in Culpepper and Albemarle counties, Virginia, where he had Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Madison, and Mr. Munroe as near neighbors, and very soon as kind friends. The library of the young lawyer consisted of a copy of Blackstone, two volumes of Don Quixote, and a volume of Tristram Shandy,—forming a significant indication of his tastes and the completeness of his professional training. Frank and joyous in his disposition,

a favorite with all from his winning manners and sportive humor, he participated with keen enjoyment in all the pranks of his young associates at the bar, and in the festive meetings of the neighborhood, and was for a time in imminent peril of becoming a victim to dissipation and excess. But an early marriage saved him from the snares of the tempter, and supplied a motive for the exertion of the brilliant talents with which he was endowed. He soon became distinguished as an eloquent advocate, and slowly laid the foundations of his fame as a sound lawyer. His companionable qualities secured for him a large circle of friends, and business flowed in apace.

Mr. Kennedy has given many pleasant sketches of the leading members of the bar, the distinguished politicians, and "the first families of Virginia," at this epoch, which was about the commencement of the present century. He does not wholly avoid the temptation of painting them in too flattering colors; living in the immediate vicinity, and writing about a generation that has not yet wholly passed away, many of whom, probably, were his own early friends, it was natural that he should be more eager to praise than to discriminate. Excessive laudation is the great vice of contemporary biography; it is favorable to the first success of a book, but lessens its chance of going down with honor to posterity. Distance in space produces about the same effect on the judgment as the lapse of time; and, under the cold climate of New England, we may be excused for thinking that our author has showered his compliments rather too freely to make them of much value.

We cannot follow the story of Mr. Wirt's rapid and brilliant success at the bar. At the early age of thirty-five, he was employed for the government on the important case of Aaron Burr's trial for treason; and though some of the oldest and most eminent lawyers in the United States were his associates, he equalled, if he did not surpass, them all in the display of forensic talent. A severe taste might condemn his speeches as too rhetorical and ambitious, and his flights of imagination as too frequent, for the sober purposes of legal discussion; but he showed also so much argumentative power, knowledge of law, and sagacity in the conduct of the case, as to win the grave approbation of the bench, no less than the applause of the bar, and the shouts of the multitude. The distinction which he acquired in this cause attended him through life, and was fully justified by his subsequent efforts. The politicians endeavored to make a prize of him; he was once chosen, almost without his knowledge, to the legislature of Virginia, and Mr. Jefferson urged him strongly to enter Congress. But fortunately, he had little taste for the wrang-

lings and cabals of the aspirants for popular favor; he preferred to give the little leisure that was allowed to him by his profession to the seductive pursuits of literature. There was a period in the history of letters in America, when *The British Spy*, *The Old Bachelor*, and *The Life of Patrick Henry* were among the first books mentioned as proofs that our countrymen were fit for something else than money-making and felling forests; and even now, though their reputation has been eclipsed by the more showy productions of a later day, they are not forgotten. The description of the blind preacher in the *British Spy* is almost as great a favorite in collections of "elegant extracts," as the account of Blennerhasset's retreat. Mr. Wirt's writings indicate very clearly, that if he had devoted himself exclusively to literary pursuits, he might have stood among the very first upon the list of American authors. But the demands of a large family and the want of inherited fortune kept him a prisoner to the courts.

Mr. Kennedy's second volume, containing the history of Mr. Wirt's life after he became Attorney General of the United States, abounds with interesting matter upon which we should be glad to comment at length; especially as the writer throws down the gauntlet to us in reference to a criticism which appeared in one of the earlier numbers of this Journal upon the life of Patrick Henry. But there is no room for the consideration of them in a mere critical notice, which was begun only because the work was received too late to allow the preparation of an article upon it in the present number. We may return to the subject hereafter, and meanwhile we would commend the work to our readers as an able and interesting memoir of one whose life belongs to the history of our country.